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SUBJECT: GSE DEPORTS ETHIOPIANS, SHRUGS OFF ICRC

REF: ASMARA 138

Classified By: CDA Melinda Tabler-Stone for reason 1.4(d).

11. (C) The GSE has begun deporting Ethiopians by the busload after cutting off support for the ICRC repatriation program (reftel). According to the ICRC deputy head of protection (please protect), the GSE has so far deported three mini-busloads of 15-30 Ethiopian passengers each, two in May and one in April. The mini-buses traveled west to the border city of Tessenei and then south to the town of Omhager, which borders both Sudan and Ethiopia. The Ethiopians were then "set loose," to cross either into Ethiopia or Sudan. Although the GSE claimed it deported only Ethiopians who volunteered to return, the problems with this method were numerous, she continued. The Ethiopians did not have any paperwork when they were deported. Those crossing into Sudan did so illegally and those crossing into Ethiopia faced the risk they would not be recognized by Ethiopian troops and could have faced imprisonment or gunfire. The GSE sent the deportees to the border with nothing but the clothes on their backs. (Note: During the ICRC repatriations, a group of 400 repatriates would be accompanied by "20 truckloads" of luggage, allowing the Ethiopians to have at least a modest beginning in their homeland). Finally, unlike the free-of-charge ICRC program, the GSE required the deportees to pay for the transport as well as food and shelter along the way.

12. (C) The GSE decision to deport Ethiopians began as a result of the Ethiopian government's (GOE) twice cancelling scheduled ICRC repatriations, one in November last year and one in March, she stated. Although the ICRC representative attributed the cancellation to an administrative error on the part of the GOE, she suspected that the GSE will not resume formal repatriation efforts even if the GOE requested restarting the program. Additionally, the GSE is strongly considering whether or not it needs the ICRC presence, she continued. She believed the GSE will make a decision in the next three to four months as to whether or not it will tolerate the organization in country. Ordinarily, the ICRC would engage third parties, such as embassies and NGOs, to lobby on its behalf. The GSE, however, "does not respect any other entity." Any outside lobbying would likely only make the situation worse.

13. (C) She also estimated that the GSE had rounded up more than 500 resident Ethiopians in the run-up to the May 24 Liberation Day celebration. Last year, the GSE held the Ethiopians in a transit center, requiring Eritrean

"guarantors" to sign for bail. Those who had no guarantors were held a few days longer and were released if they could pay the 500 nakfa annual renewal fee for their residency permits, plus any additional fees and penalties. She believed the Ethiopians detained this year face a similar process.

¶4. (C) COMMENT: It is not likely the GSE will backtrack and allow the ICRC to continue its repatriation program. Although the representative seemed hopeful that negotiations would continue for the next "three to four months," the ICRC has already distributed a list of 20 local employees it has laid off as a result of its reduced responsibilities.
TABLER-STONE